by

Robert Jennings

illustrations by Alan Hutchinson and Mark Edmonds

1940 was a big year for the comics industry. For one thing, a lot of new titles and characters were being added to the rather slender group which graced the newstands, and there also was a lot of new talent pouring into the field which would change and shape it, generally for the better, over the coming years.

1940 was also the year that Standard Publications got into the comic book business. Long established as a sucessful producer of a best selling line of pulp magazine titles, the publishers were constantly looking for oppertunities to increase their profit potential. The appetite of the American public for cheap reading matter was apparently bottomless, and comic books, a relatively new phenomonia, look very promicing indeed.

So in February of 1940 the first title of the comic publishing arm of the company, under the Nedor banner, appeared on the stands. THRILLING COMICS #1 was not an especially attractive comic. EXCITING COMICS #1 which appeared in April, and STARTLING COMICS #1 which made its bow dated June of 1940 weren't much better. In fact, as comics in general went, the three initial entries into the field were almost drab and lifeless, hardly the sort of product one would expect to see issued by a company which boasted no fewer than twenty nine pulp magazine titles on the news stands every single month.

THRILLING COMICS, the premier title, featured an enemic lineup of cowboys, magicians, big city detectives and explorers, all mixing it up in six or eight page slug fests topped by artwork so crude and colorless its amazing that the editor ever considered passing the stuff into print. The lead slot was held down by a super powered hero, a sort of glorified imitation of Doc Savage who wore a red T-shirt and flared explorer pants. Named Doc Strange he was very strong and had the ability to fly thru the air. The really strange thing was that he managed to survive past the first few issues.

Probably it was a minor miracle that any of the characters or their parent titles survived. EXCITING COMICS boasted a cover and lead slot dealing with a two fisted space opera hero copied as closely as possible from the Captain Future pulp magazine, which

Standard just happened to own. As for STARTLING, their lead character was named Captain Future, but bore no resemblence to Edmond Hamilton's creation beyond the title. His goal in life, besides shooting lightning bolts from his fingertips, seemed to be imitating Superman in every way possible.

No, it could not be called an impressive beginning, any way you looked at it. And apparently the publishers and editors must have gotten that same message too, maybe by way of sales figures, because within a few months chief editor, layout man and general trouble shooter Richard Hughes was experimenting with the format and the characters. The name of the game by this time was dynamic heroes, super powered heroes, characters with strange and awesome powers and flashy costumes to match; heroes who could inspire fear in the hearts of their opponents and whose aura of romantic adventure would translate into cash sales at the magazine racks. Nedor didn't have any of those.

But they tried. Soon a string of second rate heroes poured forth from the typewriters. There was the Mask, the Sphynx, the Woman in Red, Son of the Gods and more. The idea of adapting successful pulp heroes to the comics was tried repeatedly, without capturing reader interest. The Ghost, Rio Kid, Lone Eagle and others were all given their chance at the big time, and readership interest remained at a tepid level. Then, in 1941, after long months of experimenting, Hughes hit the right combination. In a burst of energy he created a super powered hero with a boy side kick dressed in striking costumes. The new feature would headline the cover and lead slot in EXCITING. He called the hero the Black Terror. As the same time he jazzed up the Doc Strange stories, giving him a boy assistant as well, and for STARTLING COMICS he created a little later two characters patterned on the initial success he achieved with the Terror and Doc Strange. Fighting Yank and Pyroman were also an overnight smash with young readers. And all of a sudden, all those nagging circulation problems which had been bothering Nedor Comics simply weren't there anymore.

> Bob Benton, meek young druggist, calls on formic ether vapors to help him combat America's Enemies! As The Black Terror he writes a stirring epic of light across the dark clouds of fascism and tyranny!

What are "formic ether vapors" you may ask? How could a combination of mere chemicals create such a powerful being as the Black Terror? Who was the Black Terror? Some of these questions would never be answered.

It seems that our hero, who is in real life milk mannered Bob Benton, owner of his own corner drug store, was playing around with these strange chemicals one day, and by one of those million-to-one freak accidents which somehow always manage to occur within the confines of pulp paper cartoon strips, and nowhere else, the vapors combined under strange electrical influences, and in the resulting accident both Bob Benton and his young friend Tim gained strange and unique powers. Being a dedicated civic sort, Bob decides to devote his life to stamping out crime in the streets, and immediately puts

his powers to good use venting richeous indignation on members of the local underworld, most of whom cannot believe what they are seeing even as they are experiencing it.

It wasn't much or an origin, so far as origins go, but then, none of Nedor's origins were really any too hot when you got right down to it. What was important, formic ether vapors and all, was that the Black Terror, with costume, was on his own. He made his initial bow in EXCITING COMICS #9, May, 1941 and within a few months he skyrocketed to become the most popular character in Nedor's rapidly growing stable of heroes. He was destined to become their best selling, and longest running entry into the super hero field. And as for his origin, if you were one of the ones who managed to miss EXCITING #9, you were definitely out of luck; it was never repeated, and even the brief explanitory blurb was carried only in a few issues of EXCITING and only in the first issue of BLACK TERROR COMICS. Hughes apparently didn't think much of those formic ether vapors either.

Without doubt one of the biggest selling points of this brand new hero was the snappy way he dressed. He was nothing if not impressive as he swung into action, fist frailing out against the minions of the underworld, or more popularly, against some sinister Axis enemy of democracy.

The Black Terror was dressed in black from his head to his toes. He wore nlack tights, black trunks, black boots, and a black

jersey. Around his forearms, thighs and calves were bands of gold color, to break up the monotony somewhat. He also sported a gold belt, and topping it all off was a wide flowing cape, without which no self respecting hero of the forties could be considered properly clothed. His cloak was fastened at the throat by two ineffectual looking brass buttons, and for some reason his cape was not black. It was bright red on top and bright blue underneath. His secret identity was protected by a domino mask, and on his chest was emblazed an emblem which was susposed to strike fear into the hearts of evil doers everywhere, a skull and crossbones.

Unfortunately for the Terror, the artists used during his inception and thruout most of his early years weren't really up to the challenge provided by that skull and crossbones. The symbol which was susposed to strike fear into the hearts of criminals, and awe into the hearts of young dime toting readers, was generally drawn in a manner best described as ridiculious. Or even ludicrous. For one thing, the skull was usually pictured as a sort of fat cheeked blob, and the teeth were cross hatched and not defined, and the eyes were sort of tossed on Mickey Mouse fashion, if at all. There was seldom any thought to making the thing look realistic, a fault carried over thru much of the Terror's artwork in general. It seemed pretty obvious that the artists who handled the strip regarded that chest symbol as a clumsey inconvenience to be avoided whenever possiblo. A favorite shot for years running was to picture the Terror with an arm or a fist or some other object thrown across his chest completely covering up the emblem so that the artists didn't even have to bother drawing it at all.

In later years other artists tried to readapt and change the symbol somewhat. But nobody seemed really keen about the thing. In some scenes from his later career, the Terror was shown with the emblem not only on his chest, but alsoon the back of his cape. But not very often. And not very consistently either. Even within the confines of the same story the artist might place it on the cape in one panel, and neglect to do so in many others.

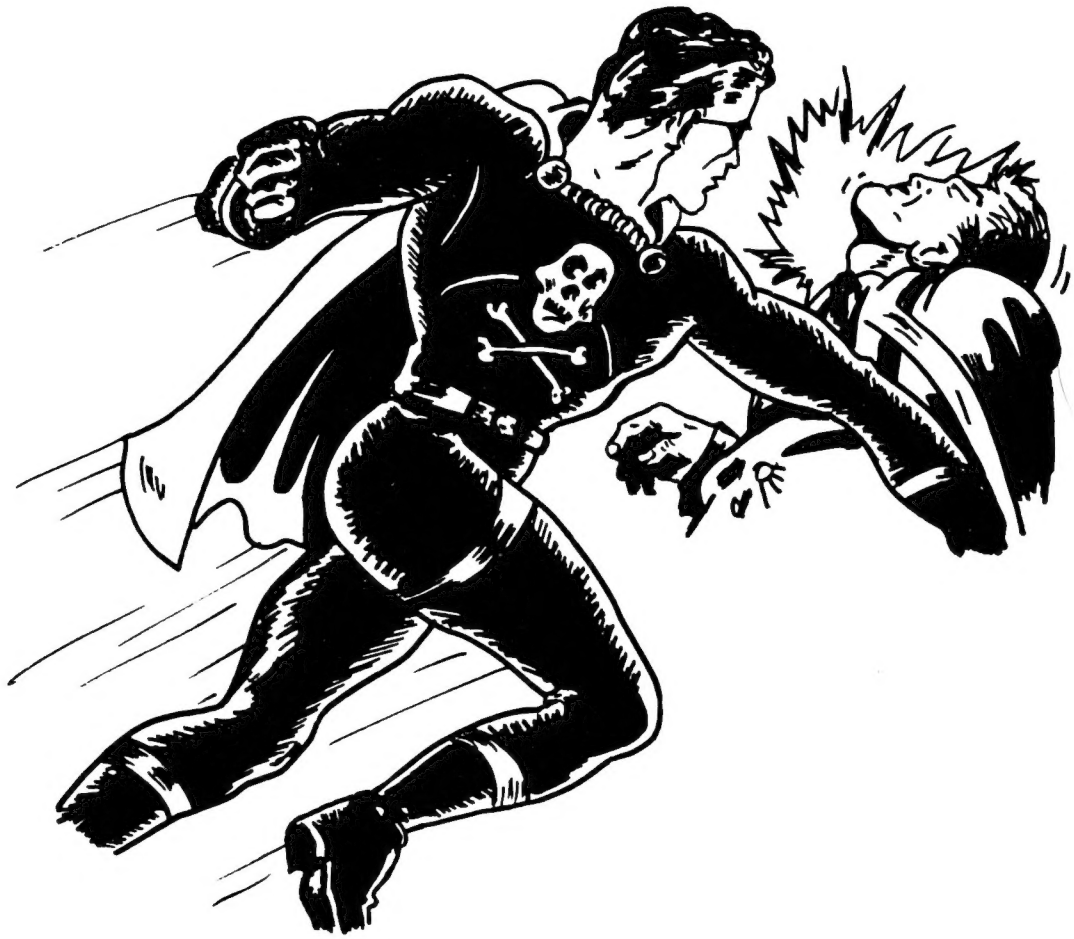
But despite the high handed treatment of the Terror's chest emblem, there was no denying the fact that when he zoomed off into action he was one of the most impressive sights in comics. This was due in large part to the concept that the Black Terror's costume was made of some sort of shinny black material. Black costumes have always had an air of sinister romance about them. Thruout history many crack military strike units have adopted black as their uniform colors for this very reason. Likewise it's no accident that most of the police departments across this country have traded in the old traditional blues for solid black costumes. Black has a raw sort of emotional appeal, and there have been many black clad comic heroes as well.

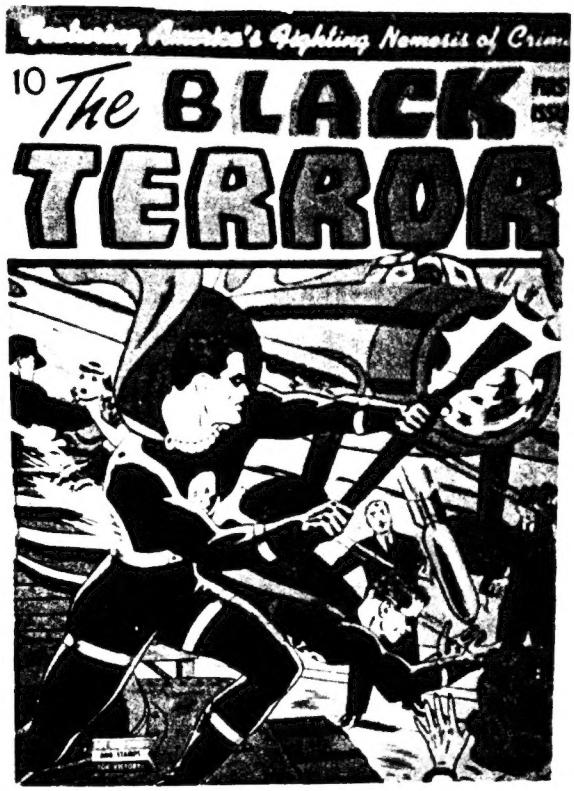
But the distinct feature the Black Terror's costume had over hords of other black clad supermen was the idea that his costume was composed of some sort of form fitting shinny black material. This allowed the artist to display the interplay of muscles; to outline and highlight individual movements and actions for each limb. When the

Terror appeared, you saw his muscles stand out in contrastic black and white detail. Almost all other black clad heroes were pictured in blotchy, dull, solid black, against which nothing emerged but the raw outline of the figure. The Terror's costume look represented a significent difference in artistic approach.

Of course that black costume must have been murder on a hot day. As a matter of fact, Benton even wore his costume underneath his everyday street clothing, this back in the days before air conditioning. It never seemed to bother our hero. And by another modern comic book miracle, no one ever noticed that enormous bulky cloak bunched up under his civilian attair either. No, instead of looking like your local Quasamotto look-alike, the comics told us that Bob Benton could strip down and leap into action in the space of a single panel, and nobody, not even his inquisitive girl friend Jean, ever caught on that under his coat and tie he wore the dynamic costume of the battling Black Terror.

So far as powers go, the Black Terror and Tim got a double helping. He couldn't fly, or even leap over tall buildings at a single bound, but he could do almost anything else you could think of. He was bullet proof, fast as a lightning streak, and had such enormous strength that at this stage of his career even Superman must have been envious. I mean this guy was strong folks. He is able to rip the top off a parked sedan, pull airplanes right out of the sky, toss armored tanks around like matchboxes, and in one story is even shown pulling a fully loaded battle ship up onto the dry dock single handed. Obviously this was not a man you'd want to kick sand at on the beach.





In addition to that he was almost invincible to every form of physical abuse or assault. One story shows the Terror trying to stop a bomb, which is about to go off in the hole of a munitions ship. He leaps down and covers the bomb with his body, smothering the blast. The force of the explosion hurls him high in the air above the ship, yet he isn't even scratched. More amazing that that, his uniform isn't even scratched. The uniform was almost as impervious as he was. It never got ripped, ravelled, or shredded, even when machine guns or morter shells were hurled against it in an effort to stop its wearer. With such a miraculious fabric at his fingertips, I always wondered why the Black Terror didn't share its secret manufacture with the government. Just think of how useful this fantastic cloth would have been during the war. I guess it never occured to the Terror. He was so busy battling it out with Axis spies and murderous super machines he probably didn't have time for such mundane considerations anyway.

Of course a hero who is totally invincible would probably end up being a pretty dull sort of guy. At least that's the way editor Hughes figured it. So he built a weakness or two in. It would have been interesting if Hughes had written in a weakness worthy of his creation, something in tune with the dynamic strength of the character. But whereas the original Green Lantern had an imperfection in his power ring which did not allow it to work against objects made of wood, and Superman eventually inheritated that nasty kryptonite problem, the Black Terror developed what has to rate as the most incredibly stupid and downright irritating weakness in the history of comics.

It seems that the powers of the Black Terror are not absolute. For some reason they do not extend to the area of his head. Of course this point never came up in his origin story, and seems to be in total conflict with the wonderous abilities of those formic ehter vapors, but what can you expect for a lousey dime anyway? So each and every story we are shown a dynamic powerful hero slamming into his opponents with fabulious strength, twisting gun barrels into metal pretzels, throwing cars and huge machines around like carboard boxes, the bullets bounding off his body like water, when suddenly, one of the villains clubs our hero on the back of the head with his gun butt or some other appropriate blunt instrument, and instead of turning around and ramming it right down the guy's throat the way any self respecting comic book hero normally would, we instead see the Black Terror falling over in a dead faint. You bet kids, laid low by a simple blow on the head. And not just an ocassional blow either. No indeed, almost every single story re-enacted this amazing event. And by yet another one of those incredible comic book coincidences, the Black Terror and his young partner Tim always managed to get bopped on the skull at exactly the same time, and almost always in exactly the same panel together. Talk about luck for the enemy.

Following this fantastic display of stupidity on the part of the writer, we are then treated to something even more astounding. When the pair come out of dreamland, they invariably find that they have been tied up with ropes, and get this one, they are unable to break loose! You heard it right, the Black Terror, who three panels ago was turning a battle ship into metal toothpicks with his bare hands, is now unable to

break a few strands of rope.

I could almost, just barely, buy that bit about being slugged on the back of the head. After all, even Achilles had a vunerable heel, and the Human Torch without his flame was just an average man, so I suspose, as incredible as it seems in view of all the other actions the Terror Twins performed, it might just have been possible that the pair were, to put it delicately, a little soft in the head. And after all it was still a pretty extrodinary thing any way you considered it. If you or I were struck on the back of the head with a gun butt or a two-by-four swung full force by some Nazi spy, we'd probably fall over stone cold dead, or at the very minimum be hospitalized with a concussion for several months. But the Black Terror not only survived this sort of brutal attack with no more than a mild headache, he did it every single story thruout his entire career. Now that's got to prove you're some sort of superman.

But to ask the readers to believe a hero as strong as the Black Terror shows himself to be, is unable to snap a few bonds of eope is streaching believability beyond the breaking point. The complete absurdity of this situation can be further illustrated when you remember that in many stories, altho the Terror's arms are bound and he is unable to free himself, his legs are not tied up and he apparently has full strength down there. In one story the criminals leave the Terror tied to a moving gear wheel in a steam ship's engine, and as the giant cog wheels turn he is in danger of being ground to a bloody pulp. By bracing himself with his feet against the approaching gear wheel the Black Terror is able not merely to stop the giant wheels from turning and susposively crushing him to death, but by so doing he also stops the entire ship's engine, and this alerts Tim and the crew of the vessel who promptly rescue him. In another story he and Tim are about to be literally boiled in oil. He uses his feet to kick out the sides of a solid steel vat in which they are tied up, and then they cut the ropes on the jagged metal. Does this make any sense to you? It sure doesn't to me.

We are also faced with the problem of heroes who are invincible to bullets and explosions as well as a wide variety of other physical danger, who are somehow going to be killed by boiling oil or crushed by moving machinery just because they are tied up. If the Terror Twins are as powerful as they are shown thruout the stories, how could any of these stupid traps have worked in the first place. A body that sheds bullets will surely not be pierced by a falling sword, or crushed by hugo metal weights, or really harmed in any way by the ridiculous variety of death traps the villains subjected our heroes to.

Herein lies the major problem with the Black Terror stories, and also with many other stories of the Nedor line. The powers of the heroes are not consistent. They are not even consistent within the framework of a single story, much less thruout the entire series. A hero who can rip the wings off an airplane in mid air is susposed to be incapacitated by a tap on the head or by inhaling poison gas. Tied up, he is unable to escape. The same hero who was shown earlier with machine gun bullets bouncing off his chest will now be killed we are told by being thrown out an airplane. After escaping from this death dive, he catches a bomb with his bare hands, which explodes in his

face, all without ill effect.

This is not story writing, it is line of thought action. There is no consideration given to either story plotting or logical consistency.

Apparently it was the only way Hughes could write. Sixteen years later, as owner, editor, and writer for ACG Comics, he created two super heroes in response to reader demands. And by an amazing stroke of luck both Magicman and Nemisis had much the same problems the Black Terror had. They were super strong, endowed with poorly defined powers, and each of these heroes could be obliterated by a smash on the back of the skull, which was administrated with tiresome regularity thru most of the adventures in which they appeared.

But perhaps it's unfair to harp contineously on the Black Terror's problems. Laying asside the collosal inconsistencies in his abilities, it is possible to see,even today, much of the dynamic magnetism which made the Terror Nedor's top selling hero. There's denying he got into some fantastic scraps.

Before the Big War got under way full blast, the Terror Twins spent most of their time smashing crime in the street and pouring it onto the semi-organized underworld round and about their city. Their stories were adequate and interesting, but it wasn't until the comic books declared war on the Axis powers that the Terror really began to hit his stride.

A typical wartime adventure, full of slam bang action, saw our heroes pitted against the forces of democracy's destruction on every front. The Terror Twins stumbled across an incredible number of sabateurs and enemy spies. Never mind that real spies and sabateurs never showed up in real life; in the comic books these sinister agents of Axis domination were lurking everywhere, and in any typical issue of BLACK TERROR COMICS, more than half of the stories showed our hero battling it out on the home front against some monsterous spy ring armed with gastly weapons and murderous intent. At least one story per book was reserved for battlefield action in which the Terror traveled to France, or Poland, or into the Japaneese controlled jungles of the Pacific, and proceeded to give the enemy a taste of good old American fighting might. The damage wrought in these little escapades was truly staggering. A list of the dead bodies piled up in a single episode would have filled a whole newspaper page of very small type.

Action was the watch word, slam packed action that exploded from one panel to the next machine gun fashion, as it propelled our heroes along toward the pre-determined page count. Details were obliterated or forgotten completely in a mad rush to get as much physical action into the story as possible. When time passes, it flashes by in a single panel. When the background shifts, or scenes change, they also move thru a single panel, or sometimes a fragment of a sentence within the panel. Any stumbling block to the continued flow of action and more action was capsulized or completely thrust aside asthe pages when flipping merrily along.

The Terror was pictured as a moving, fighting machine, often without any real purpose, and just as often, without ever bothering to use his intellectual abilities. In one story in BLACK TERROR COMICS #1, the Terror Twins need to get to Paris in a hurry to rescue Jean. How do they get there? Why, they simply steal a captured

German airplane the army has on display to sell war bonds. Why bother to steal it when they could have had it merely for the asking? Because that would have taken up an extra panel and interrupted the flow of action.

Out over Paris in their stolden German plane they are stumped. They have no idea where Jean is or how to rescue her.

"What now!? We can't land undetected," wonders Tim.

"I know!" cries the Terror, "Let's go to town, and let the future take care of itself!"

Band, Boom, Smash, the plane opens up on massed Nazi forces below them and the action starts in again. There was never time to slow down, never time to plan ahead, only the necessity of making the story move as rapidly as possible.

Altho the story focus was solidly on the Black Terror and his two fisted exploits, an effort was made to provide him with at least some incidental background development, mainly to provide a springboard to get the stories started.

When not in uniform the Black Terror was Bob Benton, a neatly dressed dark haired man who wore glasses and was the owner of a prosperous corner drug store. How it ever became prosperous is beyond me. Bob certainly never spent much time there. he was always stumbling over a new adventure, and was prone to closing down the store at even the slightest hint of action. His only predictable business response was to rush out onto the street, shedding his civilian clothes behind him as he ran, leaving the store to fend for itself. Sometimes he did leave it in charge of Jean, if she was handy, but mostly he just left it, period. We never see any other people working in the store besides Bob and Tim, and frankly, we don't see many customers there either. Maybe Bob had some secret inheritance he wasn't telling us about.

Bob was billed as a trained chemist, a talent which got him involved in a lot of trouble. Axis spies invariably wandered into Bob Benton's drug store to get those problem perscriptions filled, and whenever they needed rare or unusual chemicals to create one of their fiendish weapons of terror, you could be sure his was the only pharmacy they would even consider frequenting. Naturally ole eagle eyed Bob was quick to realize that your average red blooded American patriot had little call for diaethaline tri-oxide or whatever the stuff might be, and in a flash he and Tim were hot on the trail of another sinister Axis enterprise.

Bob as a chemist was apparently highly respected in his field. The government, along with numerous prominient professors and research scientists tended to call on him with disarming regularity to assist in vital secret experiments which unleashed dreaded new weapons or brought forth miraculious new discoveries. Why a chemist and theoridcal physicist as knowledgable and prominent in his field as Bob Benton was, ran a drug store instead of being under contract to the government was never explained. Of course anybody who went around wearing a solid black costume with a skull and cross bones on

his chest has to be considered a little escentric anyway.

Bob's foremost friend and supporting character was young Tim. Funny thing about Tim; he didn't seem to have a last name. Of course he was an active partner in the Black Terror stories, both in costume and out, so maybe that was enough to make up for any identity crisis he was suffering from. Tim was pictured as being about twelve or fourteen years old, presumably about the same age as most of the kids who were reading the comic.

Like many another comic book juvenile side kick, Tim spent a lot of time fighting racketeers and spies, and very little time in school or at play with other boys his own age. Unlike other boy assistants, his exact relationship to Bob was never explained. Other young aides were wards of their protectors, or nephews, or cousins, but Tim was just there. They were billed as good friends, but how they ever met or what the bond between them was is never explained.

Another little oddity which struck my attention was the way Tim dressed. Namely, he went around in knickers thruout most of his civilian appearances. Knickers were hot stuff back in the twenties, and even in the early thirties, but by the time the forties rolled around hardly anybody in the world dressed in knickers anymore, except maybe a few traveling golf pros, and of course, good ole Tim. When other boys were shown in the illustrations, you noticed that they all wore trousers or shorts. Tim wore knickers. No wonder he didn't spend much time playing with the other guys.

Tim was part of every single Black Terror episode. His costume was an exact duplicate of the Terror's. Nedor was the only company I can think of where they boy assistants wore exactly the same style costume as their adult heroes. Why Hughes chose not to develop something with a little flair and contrast was not explained until many years later, in the letter column of ADVENTURES INTO THE UNKNOWN #165, 1966, when in answer to that very question he replied, "Personally, we liked the idea of Tim wearing a costume that duplicated the Black Terror's; it made them more of a team." Case closed.

Tim was part of all the stories, and altho he often played a significent role in the adventures, it was very easy to lose him. For whatever reason, duplicate costumes or otherwise, it was very easy to lose him. He blended in rather nicely with the background. Sometimes when you noticed him you wish you hadn't. He tended to use the oldest and stalest of wise cracks and unhumorous puns. In many stories he makes himself really useful, rescueing the Terror from eminient disaster after he received his usual clout on the head, but somehow it is the adult Black Terror that completely dominates the comic. Tim was mostly there for the ride.

Yet another little plot inconsistency occured when the Terror Twins vaulted into action. Bob Benton shed his glasses and street clothes and became the Black Terror. Tim on the other hand, slipped into his fighting togs and became simply Tim again. The youngster was never given any new catchy name to go with his new identity. Batman may have had Robin, the Green Arrow Speedy and Captain America his Bucky, but Tim was just Tim in costume and out. It was never explained why people such as Jean Starr for example, who were well acquainted with both Bob Benton and the Black Terror, never

caught on that the Tim in the drug store was the same Tim who fought beside the Black Terror.

Jean Starr was the third and final member of the background cast. Jean was susposed to be a good looking blonde girl, altho sometimes it was hard to tell about that. The art was not very consistent on this particular point. The color artist also had some problem remembering she was blonde and not a red head or a brownette. Originally employed as the secretary to the mayor of the city, she joined the Red Cross when the war broke out, and proved she could get into just as much trouble in uniform as she had in her civilian occupation.

Jean provided the female interest in the stories. In the sterotyped world of comic books this means she pryed into Bob's affairs, insulted him constantly, berated his lack of courage and initive, got underfoot during the Black Terror adventures, and was constantly being captured by the enemy at the most inopportune moments. In short, she confirmed every young boy's deepest prejudices about how much trouble women could be.

In addition to all that, she was a one woman Axis secret weapon. As quick to stop the Terror Twins as that fatle blow on the head, was the vile threat of some thug threatening to kill Jean right on the spot unless the Terror surrendered immediately. He always did, every single time. If we didn't know better we might suspect that maybe, just maybe, the Terror was sweet on that girl.

Jean was not a shrinking violet. Never let it be said she stood helplessly by wringing her hands and crying her eyes out when there was fast moving action going on. She horned in on the Black Terror's adventures, but she helped pay her way in most of the stories. A scooped up tommy gun was just as familiar in her hands as a powder puff or a compact, and it didn't bother her in the least to stab a Nazi in the back when the ocassion called for it.

She also had real guts. Many a time when she had been captured by the enemy, inadvertantly, of course, the human fiends

insisted on torturing the poor girl to force some vital piece of information from her. But they were never sucessful. The comics didn't go into detail on the point, but you know with the Gestapo working on her night and day that it couldn't have been a very pleasant experience. She never spilled a single secret in the entire run of the comics, and she also never gave up hope. To use the vernacular of the day, Jean was one tough cookie.

Despite the fact that she was well acquainted with both the Terror Twins and with Bob and Tim, Joan never suspected, even for an instant, that the two were one and the same. Considering the astounding number of disappearing acts staged by Bob and Tim, and the sudden reappearance of the Terror Twins mere seconds later, we can only conclude that Jean was an incredibly trusting person. Or maybe she was just dumb, its hard to gage such things from the funny books. Of course the real problem was not whether she would ever learn his secret identity, but why the hell he ever needed one to begin with.

Indeed, most of the other Nedor heroes, Fighting Yank, Pyroman and the like, all managed to confide their secrets to their girl friends and close families, and they never seemed to suffer for it. But not so with the Black Terror. He had to have a secret identity, and that identity had to be protected. The idea of anyone ever connecting the dynamic Black Terror with meek, mild mannered Bob Benton was unthinkable. Frankly he could have gotten the same sort of privacy with an unlisted telephone number. I guess that was unthinkable as well.

"Can the Terror Twins overcome the mighty power of harnessed lightning, turned to Nazi use against American industry? Watch the fireworks as meek young druggist Bob Benton assumes the role of— The Black Terror...to smash the enemies of democracy!"

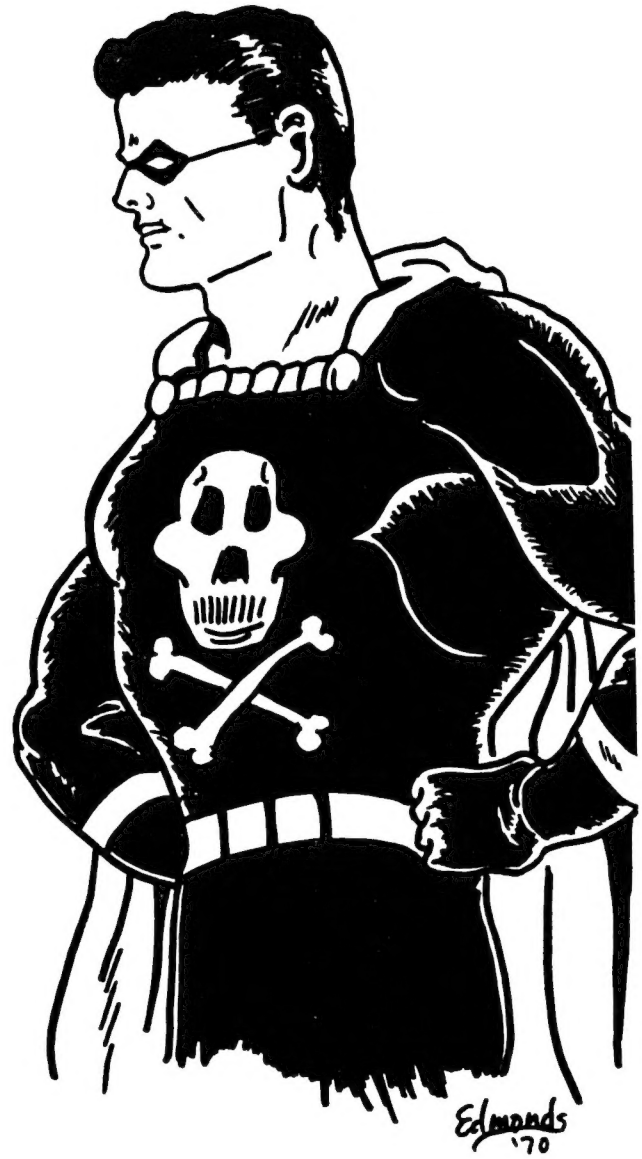
Could he? Come on now, was there really any doubt? Of course he could. It did it three times an issue in his own comic book, which lasted twenty seven issues, and he also managed to shoot the works for fourteen or fifteen pages as the lead feature in EXCITING COMICS, plus an appearance every single issue of AMERICA'S BEST COMICS, which ran thirty one issues. In EXCITING he was the longest comtineously running feature ever produced, relinquishing the lead slot only in late 1947, after most of the other Nedor super heroes had fallen by the wayside. He managed to hang on as a second slot supporting feature until EXCITING also bit the dust with issue #69.

Of course it wasn't always fun and games. There were some pretty tough times there, times when even a veteran reader might have harbored some secret doubts that the Terror would pull it off. How about the time the Nazis invented that giant set of underwater turbine ships, whose generators created a fearly electrical charge that ripped Allied shipping apart and killed everyone within its range. Times were really tight when Bob fell into the water and was almost electricuted. Almost a stroke of fate that finally saw the boys pull that one thru, after thousands of tons of badly needed military supplies had been destroyed in the plot. Or how about the time the Black Terror agrees to help a lady in distress and rescue her husband, held prisoner inside a Nazi concentration camp inside fortress Europe itself. Little did they know that the man was a top research scientist with the key to a mysterious weapon within his brain, and even as they leap into action the dreaded Gestapo is also reaching to snare the pray.

The Black Terror had it hot with the enemy. You could count on excitment and danger in every single episode. The stories were all filled with strange new machines, completely degenerate examples of evil incarnate in human form and plenty of good wholecome ani-Axis war propaganda. The Black Terror was born to fight that war, and it did it with every ounce of his strength.

"The sands of defeat run very low for the Nazi hangmen——the day of retribution is at hand! Panic striken, the Germans unleash huge robot bombs on civilian populations, killing indes-

criminately! But not even the new mechanical murder weapons can stave off the inevitable, as Bob Benton, the one and only Black Terror, hunts the Hun to his lair!



The Black Terror was right at home with the war effort, but the end was drawing near. He was so comfortable slugging it out with sabateurs and spies that he was a little hesitant about giving it all up. When peace finally came we see the Black Terror actually fighting on for months after the conflict was officially over. Perhaps his reluctance to leave the war zone was prompted by some sort of psychic precognition. Altho no one realized it then, the end of the war would spell disaster for many of the super human heroes.

But the Terror really shouldn't have worried. There was no need to live a war. Story wise he simply went back to the old neighborhood and turned his attention to crime and social problems. Times were changing, and one of the first things to change for the Black Terror was his artwork. The illustrations in most of the issues up thru the war years had been pretty bad. Of course you could recognize figures and buildings and cars and most of the other machinery, but even a little kid could see that the art left a lot to be desired. Looking back today as collectors there is a certain sort of charm in the stale coloring and the sloppy figure work. But back in 1946 the editor didn't see it that way.

A lot of new faces showed up around the strip, as people like Jerry Robinson, Mort Meskin, Camy, George Tuska, Kurt Schaftenburg and many others began to inject a whole new life to the series.

The stories also took on a new slant. There was still plenty of action. You couldn't very well have a Black Terror story without lots of action, only now it was logically directed. There was a framework of actual plotting to the episodes. Stories had real opening sequencies, logical motivation and the characters reacted in a reasonable and intelligent manner. The Terror Twins depended on their brains as well as the force of their right fists. Wisecracking took a sudden nosedive, while the variety of story ideas expanded greatly.

So far as powers went, the Black Terror, formally one of the strongest men in comics, was toned down considerably. He was still bulletproof and super human, but he didn't display that reckless abandon which in past years had seen him walk across the fields of France and descimate an entire armored division in nine pages. The stories were being written for both action and believability now.

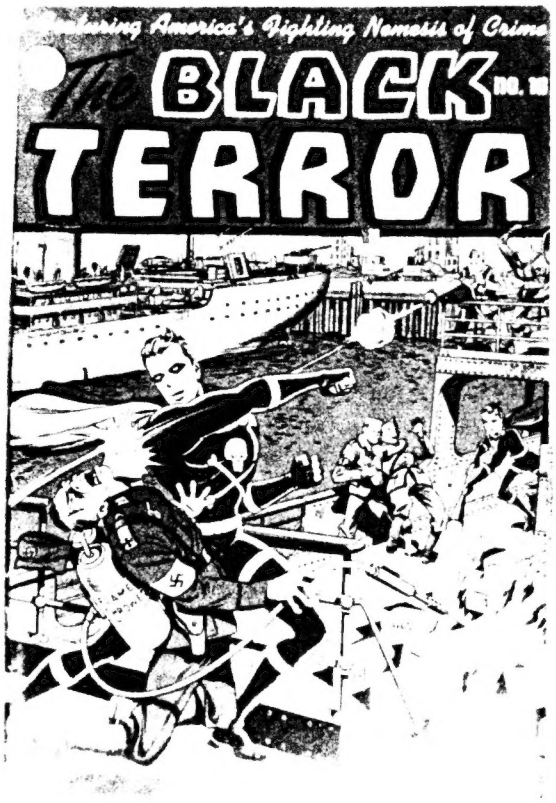
The Terror found himself involved with closed room mysteries, scheming confidence men,

crooked gambling operations, and inheritance murder plots. And it did it all with a new style that did credit to his past potential. There seems no doubt that these better written and generally better illustrated stories had much to do with prolonging his existence in an era when other super heroes were dropping dead in droves.

For many issues things went well. His magazines went from quarterly scheduling to bi-monthly. But unfortunately quality production was simply not enough. The whole direction of comics was changing. Not only comics, but the entire popular publishing industry as well. The end of the forties spelled the end of most of the pulps, including many of the Standard titles. Ned Pines, owner of the outfit, decided to make some changing, especially in his comic book empire. Some of the changes were small, like creating the Standard flag logo for the upper left hand corner. Other changes were larger, like creating new characters, adding more titles, and killing the Black Terror.

It couldn't last forever. Times were tough on heroes. Even characters with such memorable circulation figures as Captain America, Flash, and the Justice Society, were faced with sharply declining sales. The soldiers who had bought millions of comics for part time diversion as few years earlier were out of the service, back home working at civilian jobs and busy raising families. The kids who had followed every single episode with baited breath had all grown up. They were off in college, or earning their own way in the world of working adults. They no longer had the time for comic books. And the new generation, if they read comics at all, preferred different things. Funny animals for the new readers, crime and sexy jungle girls for the older kids. The heroes were dying. Black Terror was one of many who were sacrificed to the change in taste.

Well, it hadn't been such a bad run, seven years. Seven years of incredible adventure, seven y ears of unceasing dedication to the service of his country, fighting for truth and justice on every frontier. I'm sure he would have preferred to go right on fighting, leaping into the battle against impossible odds, leading us onward toward even more fantastic adventures. But it was not to be.



When it was all over and done with, you had to say that the Black Terror had honestly done his best. Looking back thirty years later its easy to laugh at the sterotyped plotwork, to snicker at his contrived weakness, to smile at the cardboard characterization. But when you open the books and actually read the stories, all that somehow does not seem important. You forget all his problems as the force of the character, the raw elemental appeal of the Black Terror leaps off that page, grabs you by the arm and pulls you right into those panels. When death rays smash into government buildings at Washington, you are there. When protection racketeers try to shake down neighborhood merchants you are just as outraged as Bob and Tim. You are right there with him as he fights against the murderous sabatage plot, battling onward to his inevitable sucessful victory. The Black Terror has nothing to be ashamed of. He can rest comfortably on his laurels knowing he accomplished his purpose. He acted in stories that involved us in action and danger and high adventure, and he made us enjoy it all. What more can you ask from a comic book hero than that?